

Ashes: the ground of our being

*Sermon preached by the Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Vicar,
at the noon service, February 17, 2010:
The First Day of Lent—Ash Wednesday.
Based on Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21.*

"Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return."

There is nothing otherworldly about Ash Wednesday; no opiate softens the message of this day. And, yet, by the thousands around this wonderful city and, indeed, the world, we have lined up to be reminded that we are dust and to dust we shall return.

Year after year on this day I grapple with what it is exactly that the church invites us to do with this piece of hardball information. Above all else we whose privilege it is to preach believe that our job as preachers is to proclaim the Good News. Is this it? Is this information good?

I believe it is. With all my heart I believe that it is *indeed* good news in part simply because it is so utterly and finally true; and beyond that, in some profound way these words also convey a message that is as liberating as any message we shall ever receive.

It is a message that equalizes us. Though we claim to value equality—all people are created equal and all that—the truth is, the cherished stratifications we create do not reflect that value, not really. Every aspect of our lives is increasingly stratified. Upgrades we often call them, more and more distinctions between levels of people. At certain echelons we need not touch the ordinary folks at all—those who travel, lodge, live at levels other than ours. No matter how many times I tell myself that the food served in First Class is still just airline food, I know it is better. I have

peeked through the curtains: it is better and the flight attendants smile more than they do in Tourist Class.

Not so on Ash Wednesday. Today we are all dust. And the church tells us emphatically that all our cherished distinctions so carefully and extravagantly financed will dissolve into dust again. How marvelous is that? In the end we find that all our talk about being one—one with one another, one with nature, one with the world, one with God—is not after all just talk but the truth. We reenter that from which we have come, not ground into nothing because we are worthless and sinful but returned to the ground of our being, which we also call God. That is not just "good" news; that is amazing news. It sets us free and it resets our priorities (or it can). In a strange twist, these dark ashes, which serve as an obvious reminder of our mortality, bear witness to an even more profound immortality. The dust from which we were formed remains the fecund ground for continued life. All that is to be is not yet.

There is also about Ash Wednesday an element of deep sensuousness. The day is sensuous because it is earthy and real. We see the ashes on one another; we feel their presence on our foreheads. By the end of the day the stain of the ashes on the thumbs of those of us who administer them will withstand our efforts to wipe them easily away.

The smudge lingers, a tactile reminder that what we appear to be is not all that we are. We are more than these carefully constructed appearances, personas we present to one another and even to ourselves, notions of ourselves that we desire others to behold. Ash Wednesday reminds us that we are more than that, more than our own creation. We are part of something that is bigger and more permanent than just this—for we have come from dust and to dust we shall return.

And it is that truth—that we are created to be more than we sometimes are—that makes Ash Wednesday so potentially transformative. Here enters the whole notion of wretchedness, an unfortunate word but—speaking for myself—not one void of aptness. **Thinking, though, about our wretchedness rarely reduces our wretchedness.** Imagining ourselves as part of a stream of life that connects us inextricably to God and to one another, though, opens our hearts and minds to consider the ways in which we live and breathe and have our being with one another. Every second of life, every speck of dust, every breath we come to understand as hallowed, a place, a moment that is or can be infused with God, meaning that nothing and no one can be labeled as a “throw away,” least of all ourselves.

So, of course, that penetrating awareness brings us up short, calling into our

consciousness those ways in which we live that are counter to this profound truth that we have come from, remain in, and return to God. We suddenly notice things we had stopped seeing before the timely and annual reminder of Lent, things and ways that separate us from others, that divide the world into those who have and those who don't, that make us the center of the universe, isolating us into worlds we have created for ourselves and for our kind.

So, of course, there is an element—a big element—of penitential thinking on this day. We want to renew, to return, to remember that for which we have been made, that about us which is most important and most true. Is that heavy? You bet it is and it needs to be. No apologies there. But it is heavy with promise and hope for newness as well as heavy with repentance and regret. Ash Wednesday invites us to begin a journey that is filled with repentance and examination but one that erupts into the joy of Easter and the fullness of the resurrection. Good roads lead to good places, and we are on a good road and Easter is a good place.

In the name of God: *Amen.*

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